

**From Dürer to Van Gogh:**  
Gifts from Eliza Greene Radeke  
and Helen Metcalf Danforth



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**MUSEUM OF ART**

RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN





**Fig. 1** Photographer unknown, *Portrait of Eliza [Greene Metcalf] Radeke* [President, Board of Trustees, RISD, 1913-1931], n.d. Silver print, 13 9/16 x 10 7/8 in. Bequest of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 1994.002



**Fig. 2** Original photographer unknown; Helen Metcalf (Mrs. Murray S.) Danforth, President, Board of Trustees, 1931-1965; Fleet Library, RISD.

## From Dürer to Van Gogh: Gifts from Eliza Greene Radeke and Helen Metcalf Danforth

The inaugural exhibition in the new Vincent and Linda Buonanno Works on Paper Gallery celebrates the remarkable contributions to the Museum of two women, Eliza Greene Radeke (née Metcalf, 1854-1931) and her niece Helen Metcalf Danforth (1887-1984). Both were instrumental in the formation and growth of the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) as a whole and to increasing the institution's prestige. Eliza Radeke [fig. 1] served as President of the Board of Trustees from 1913 until her death in 1931. Helen Danforth [fig. 2] succeeded her aunt as President and Chair from 1931 until 1965.



The Museum of Art was founded simultaneously with the Rhode Island School of Design in 1877 by a group of women led by Eliza Radeke's mother, Helen Adelia Rowe (Mrs. Jesse) Metcalf. RISD's stated purpose was to educate artists in drawing, painting, modeling, and design for the benefit of industry and art, and to educate the public so that they could appreciate and support art and design. The creation of a museum collection was inseparable from these objectives. Both Eliza Radeke and Helen Danforth, as heirs to those aspirations, made extraordinary individual gifts to all departments of the Museum, especially to drawings, prints, ancient art, textiles, American furniture and decorative arts, and European and American painting. Drawings and prints were essential components in the overall educational goals they set, as well as being personal passions for both women. Between them, they presented over 1,300 works on paper to the Museum. In concert with the Museum's directors and curators and with dealers overseas and at home, these women made truly remarkable contributions to the holdings of 19th-century French drawings, but the collection is also decidedly rich in Old Master [fig.3] and American drawings.

Although both women had wide-ranging tastes and purchased exceptional drawings of all types, a few broad generalizations may be made about the kinds they sought and favored. Eliza Radeke was inspired by works on paper as germinations of artistic ideas, seeing in them instructive potential. Sketches, including figure studies, animal studies, landscapes, and portraits, all fit this ideal. She often selected a notable subject or exquisite technical example over a well-known artistic name. Helen Danforth's gifts reflect her interest in acquiring works by the most important artists and thereby increasing the prestige of RISD and its Museum. She enhanced the holdings with many finished presentation drawings by the greatest names in the history of art. Both approaches have enriched the collection in innumerable ways.



**Fig. 3**

Francesco Mazzuoli, called Il Parmigianino

Italian, 1503-1540

*Head of Julius Caesar*, 1530-1535

Pen and ink, wash, white heightening

on laid paper, 3 3/8 x 2 3/4 in.

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.517

The Eliza G. Radeke Building, now the heart of a much expanded and renovated Museum, was completed in 1926. Mrs. Radeke's brothers, Stephen O. Metcalf and Senator Jesse H. Metcalf, funded the building and named it to honor her. The Radeke Building opened with several galleries dedicated to drawings and prints. The current exhibition features many of the same works on view in the original 1926 installation, which included a diverse grouping of artists, nationalities, and media.

## Eliza Greene Radeke

Eliza Greene Metcalf was an early graduate of Vassar College. In 1880, she married Dr. Gustav Radeke, a German émigré and collector of Old



Master drawings. Works such as Parmigianino's *Head of Julius Caesar*, 1530-1535 [see fig. 3], presented to the Museum in 1920, likely came from Dr. Radeke's personal collection. After her husband's death in 1892, Mrs. Radeke devoted herself to the development of RISD with a particular focus on enlarging the Museum's holdings in all areas, first as a board member and then as President of the Board of Trustees.

Mrs. Radeke initiated and expanded many of the Museum's collections by seeking out purchases, collaborating with dealers and agents, and purchasing artworks with her own funds to present as gifts. Her contributions include objects in every Museum department. The fortuitous pairing of Mrs. Radeke with L. Earle Rowe (Director of RISD from 1912 until he fell ill in 1928, then the Museum's first Director from 1929 until his death in 1937) was very important in determining the direction and strategy for acquiring new objects. Both envisioned a truly encyclopedic art-historical assemblage and worked together extensively on new acquisitions. Interestingly, in the area of drawings, Mrs. Radeke was the primary buyer, for it was here that her ambitions for the Museum overlapped with her own predilections.

Drawings were not only available in large numbers on the early 20th-century market, but also were relatively inexpensive; thus Mrs. Radeke could—and did—purchase them outright for the Museum. Unwilling to wait for Museum board approval and thus risk losing an important object, she regularly bought drawings with her own funds and presented them immediately. Rowe characterized her approach to acquiring objects in this way:

Mrs. Radeke did not collect works of art to grace her home, and defer the time of the public's having a chance to see them infrequently on loan to the Museum, or to have them in the permanent collection; rather did she give the larger part of her works of art to be of immediate and permanent use (Woodward, p. 32).

She gave the Museum some 260 drawings purchased with her own money, but the number of drawings that she found on the market and suggested to Rowe for purchase with Museum funds was much greater.

Mrs. Radeke actively sought works on paper by traveling to New York and conferring with dealers such as Scott & Fowles, Keppel & Co., P. and D. Colnaghi, Joseph Brummer, and Jacques Seligmann, all firms well known to the history of collecting in America. In 1913, she visited the Armory Show in New York, the exhibition credited with invigorating the taste for French art and Modernism in the United States. In his history of the Armory Show (1963), Milton Brown compared Mrs. Radeke to other young buyers at the exhibition, including Albert C. Barnes, and revealed an admiration for the lady shared by many of her contemporaries. "Mrs. E. G. Radeke, ..., with no pretensions to being a collector of modern art, but with much greater acumen, bought a Matisse drawing for \$67.50 and two small Signac watercolors for \$65" (Brown, pp. 101-102). Now on view in this exhibition, Henri Matisse's figural drawing [fig. 4] is a first investigation of pose. The two Signac watercolors were sketched outdoors in Venice as groundwork for the artist's Pointillist studio work and are also currently on display. The purchases demonstrate Mrs. Radeke's willingness to embrace modern art, as well as her attention to figure studies as appropriate to the educational mission of RISD and its Museum.

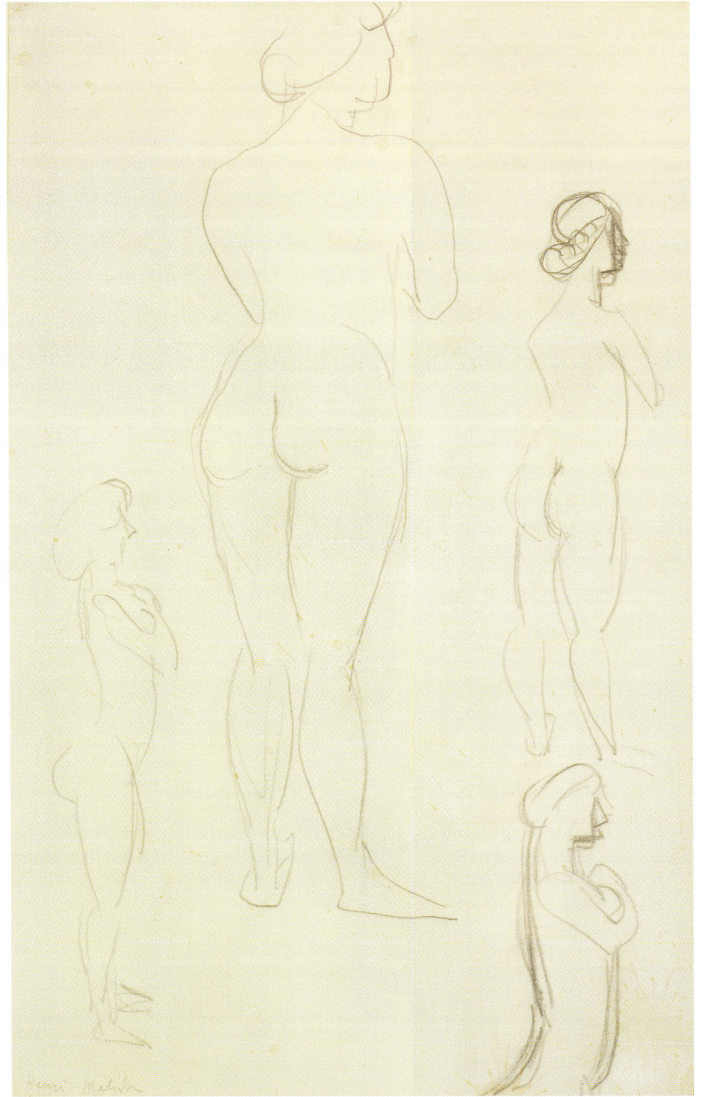
Mrs. Radeke acquired objects for the Museum alongside many of the best-known names in American museum history. A brief comparison is illuminating. Henry Clay Frick (1849-1919) and J. Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913) were passionately focused on the integrity of their personal collections, which became posthumous intact memorials in the form of designated museums. Both had vast funds with which to pursue their goals. Two others, Albert C. Barnes (1872-1951) and Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924), intended to convert



their personal holdings into museums during their lifetimes, as did William Wilson Corcoran (1798-1888), whose long-established Washington, D.C. collection became a museum (and then an art college) in 1874. As with Mrs. Radeke, the education of both artists and the public were vital motivations for these philanthropists, inspired in part by the example of the recently established South Kensington (now Victoria and Albert) Museum in London (1852).

Many university art museums attracted generous private donations during this period. Grenville Lindall Winthrop (1864-1943) was a focused buyer of 19th-century works with especial depth in the art of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. His collection went to Harvard University in total after his death. Similarly, Katharine S. Dreier (1877-1952) gave her specialized archive of works associated with the Société Anonyme—a group dedicated to abstract art, which she co-founded with Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp in 1920—to Yale University shortly before her death.

Among these examples, Mrs. Radeke was the only collector whose aims were tied specifically to the simultaneous growth of an educational institution. She was unique in combining a decidedly acquisitive disposition with a philanthropic allegiance to a single institution, which was in turn committed to immediate public display. In this approach, perhaps Charles Lawrence Hutchinson (1854-1924), who helped to found and sustain the Art Institute of Chicago throughout his life, offers a rare parallel. Mrs. Radeke recognized a gap in public and higher education that only a museum could fill. Her keen sensitivity to her audience informed her decisions with regard to objects. One outcome of this was that she never focused on acquiring multiple examples of one artist's work. In several cases she rejected this opportunity even when it was within reach. Instead, she diversified and sought to acquire and exhibit the broadest possible range of artists and techniques.



**Fig. 4**  
Henri Matisse  
French, 1869-1954  
*Four Studies of a Nude*, ca. 1910  
Crayon on wove paper, 13 1/2 x 8 1/2 in.  
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 21.483





**Fig. 5**

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres

French, 1780-1867

*Portrait of Thomas Charles Naudet*, 1806

Pencil on wove paper, 9 x 6 3/4 in.

Museum Appropriation Fund 29.087

Although Mrs. Radeke bought drawings of various regions and eras, she focused in particular on French and American drawings. Her successes in these areas may be attributed, in large part, to her association with Martin Birnbaum, a young art dealer with the prestigious firm of Scott & Fowles in New York. They met in 1914. For the next sixteen years, first as a representative of Scott & Fowles and then as a private consultant, Birnbaum worked as Mrs. Radeke's agent, seeking out and acquiring drawings throughout Europe and America. A man of extraordinary discernment, Mr. Birnbaum also built the Grenville Winthrop collection. Birnbaum's expertise and personal passion for 19th-century French drawings played a formative role in Mrs. Radeke's taste. The relationship was clearly one of mutual esteem. In his autobiography, Martin Birnbaum described Mrs. Radeke as a "self-effacing, public-spirited benefactor, but her quiet manner masked a remarkably happy flair for beauty and originality." She was "noble...[with] not only a great flair for art, but also for human character" (Birnbaum, pp. 201, 86).

Birnbaum's contacts were extensive and expertly cultivated. He pursued objects from private parties throughout Europe, preferring to go right to the source when possible. Among his contacts were the respective heirs of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Théodore Chassériau, as well as the English artist and collector Charles Ricketts. Frequent correspondence between Birnbaum and Mrs. Radeke, in the form of letters sent from all the capitals of Europe, reveals the level of her involvement, which was decidedly active. She often desired to see photographs of objects before buying them, as difficult and time-consuming as that may have been at the time. Only occasionally would the scrupulous agent dare to press Mrs. Radeke for a decision out of fear of losing a great object. One such exchange occurred over Édouard Manet's drawing *Mlle Victorine in the Costume of an Espada* (*Victorine Meurend*) in a letter dated 1916 from New York (Fleet Library, RISD):



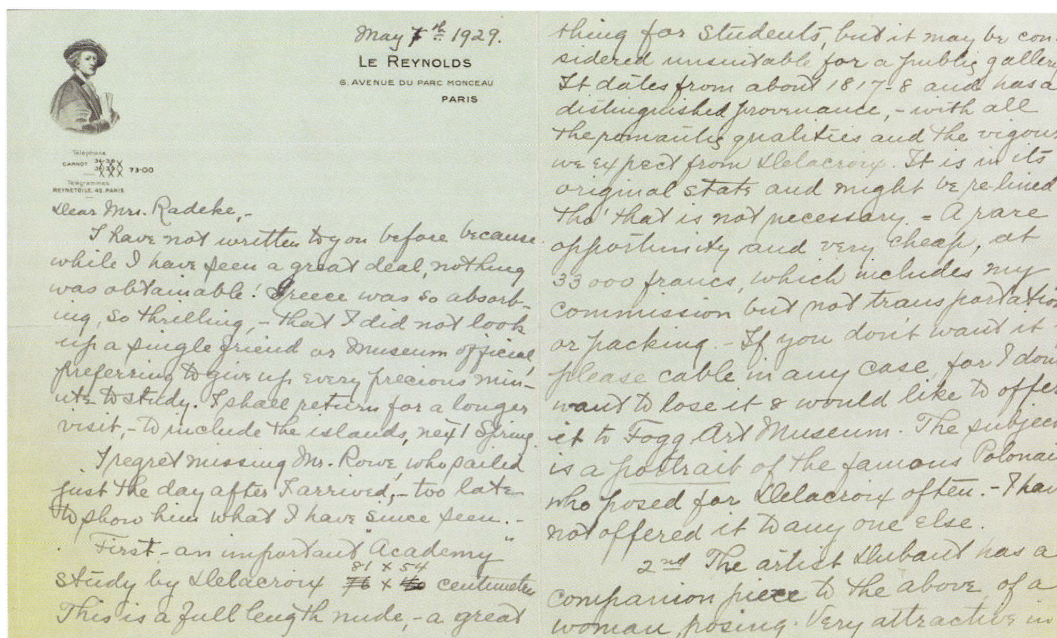


Fig. 6 Letter of May 7, 1929, from Martin Birnbaum to Mrs. Gustav Radeke; Fleet Library, RISD.

Dear Mrs. Radeke, Will you be in town this week? A remarkable Manet watercolor (Toreador in the Bullring) signed has been offered for sale (\$650.00) at very low price for such an interesting rarity. It is really a fine complete example and more attractive than most of his subjects. I think it is probably the original study for the Havemeyer picture. Would you dare buy such a thing on my advice? I must give the owner an answer immediately, and everybody is out of town,--if I had more time I would send it on approval, and if I am given more time I will gladly do so.

Mrs. Radeke must have acted quickly, for the drawing is now in the Museum's collection and on view in this exhibition. The sheet is in fact an intermediary work in preparation for an etching made by Manet after his painting now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Another urgent exchange concerned the sale of a large group of works by Ingres at auction in Paris

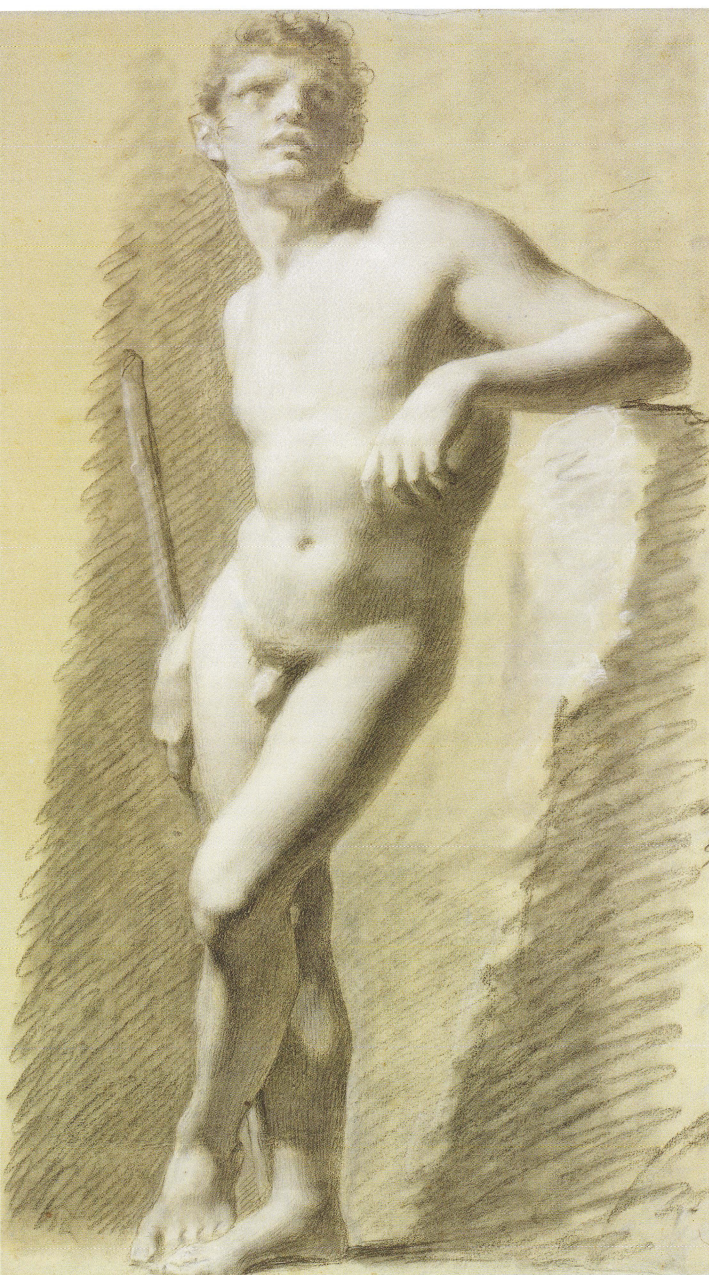
thing for students, but it may be considered unsuitable for a public gallery. It dates from about 1817-8 and has a distinguished provenance,--with all the painter's qualities and the vigour we expect from Delacroix. It is in its original state and might be relined tho' that is not necessary. - A rare opportunity and very cheap, at 35000 francs, which includes my commission but not transportation or packing. - If you don't want it, please cable in any case, for I don't want to lose it & would like to offer it to Fogg Art Museum. The subject is a portrait of the famous Polonais who posed for Delacroix often. - I have not offered it to any one else.

2<sup>nd</sup> The artist Delacroix has a companion piece to the above of a woman posing. Very attractive in

on June 20, 1929. Birnbaum wrote to describe several drawings of interest, and Mrs. Radeke replied in the concise but clear language of a cablegram on June 17, 1929: "Limit twelve thousand covering all expenses. Two drawings enough. Your choice. Radeke." Due to soaring prices, Mr. Birnbaum acquired only one drawing from the sale, Ingres's exquisite early portrait of Charles Naudet [fig. 5]. The drawing was purchased with Museum funds. Price was often a factor in Mrs. Radeke's acquisitions, and both she and Birnbaum were tough negotiators. Birnbaum regularly walked away from drawings on the principle that they were too highly priced. A drawing by the French Baroque master Georges de la Tour, for example, was "exquisite," with a fascinating history, but overpriced in his opinion. Mrs. Radeke let it go.

One exchange is particularly illustrative of the care taken by both Birnbaum and his client to find only the most suitable objects for RISD [fig. 6].





**Fig. 7**

Pierre-Paul Prud'hon

French, 1758-1823

*Study of a Nude Youth*, ca. 1800-1817

Chalk on laid paper, 22 1/4 x 11 1/4 in.

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 29.083

On May 7, 1929, he wrote from Paris to inform Mrs. Radeke of several studies of nudes available for purchase, stating: "I do not know the conditions in your life classes, - but I hope you will see the wisdom of acquiring such admirable works by great masters, to inspire students while they are working." He described a nude study by Delacroix of a famous model (called the "Polonais" or "Polish Man") as "a great thing for students, but it may be considered unsuitable for a public gallery." He added, "I am very conservative when I advise, and that will explain my attitude about the 'Polonais,' of which I enclose a photograph." A female figure by Pierre-Olivier Dubaut was "charming and modest...and could be shown in any gallery." Mrs. Radeke did not buy either of these drawings. She did, however, purchase an academic nude by Pierre-Paul Prud'hon [fig. 7] mentioned in the same letter. Was it deemed the most appropriate of the three for a public audience?

Mrs. Radeke's contribution to the College and the Museum is hard to estimate, for it must take into account time, passion, and dedication, as well as more material factors. Consistent in contemporary descriptions of Mrs. Radeke is the emphasis on her refined eye, her taste, and her astute judgment of character. By aligning herself with only the most reliable agents and the notable experts of the day, she could be sure that her own personal vision would not overshadow the needs of the audience she served. Her dedication to the growth of one educational institution and its art collection may be unprecedented in American museum history.

## Helen Metcalf Danforth

After the death of Eliza Radeke in 1931, the Metcalf family continued their strong support of RISD through leadership, financial patronage, and collection development. Mrs. Radeke's niece, Helen Metcalf Danforth, the daughter of Stephen O. and Esther Pierce Metcalf, assumed the role of RISD's President. She led the Board of Trustees from 1931 until 1965.



Under Mrs. Danforth's guidance, the College evolved from a regional educational institution to a nationally recognized center of higher learning. In 1932, RISD received the authority to grant degrees. College attendance rose, Museum visitors increased, and schoolchildren from the state began to attend regular didactic exhibition tours. Mrs. Danforth strove to elevate the Museum to an establishment in line with national standards. During her early years as President, she traveled to art museums in Chicago, Detroit, Buffalo, and elsewhere in the United States in order to meet with their staffs and view their galleries.

Like her predecessor, Mrs. Danforth was committed to the idea that the Museum should acquire and keep an encyclopedic group of prized objects that would be accessible to both students and the public. During her tenure, a succession of talented Museum directors worked with her on this goal. L. Earle Rowe stayed at the Museum until his death in 1937. His successor, Alexander Dornier (1938-1941), favored acquisitions that filled gaps in the already strong collection. Director George Washburn (1942-1949) sought to make the Museum a vital part of the community. He also created new curatorial posts in prints and drawings and in decorative arts, which had a major impact on those areas.

Throughout these years, Mrs. Danforth played an essential supervisory role in the Museum acquisition process. She facilitated many transactions by spotting objects on overseas journeys or on visits to New York dealers. Letters reveal that her judgment was crucial to both directors and dealers. She often contributed her personal funds for purchases proposed by directors when the Museum coffers ran short, as was inevitable during World War II. Mrs. Danforth was also goal-oriented, and she encouraged the purchase of works by major artists to round out the collection and to elevate the prestige of the Museum. Martin Birnbaum wrote to her (April 17, 1934): "I shall keep my eye open for English watercolours, from Cozens, Girtin, Cotman,



**Fig. 8**

Paul Cézanne

French, 1839-1906

*The Card Player*, ca. 1890-1892

Graphite and watercolor on

wove paper, 19 1/8 x 14 1/4 in.

Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth 42.211





**Fig. 9**  
 Georges Seurat  
 French, 1859-1891  
*At the Gaîté Rochecrouart*  
*(Café-concert)*, ca. 1887-1888  
 Conté crayon, gouache on laid paper, 12 x 9 1/4 in.  
 Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth 42.210

Cox, Blake, Turner, Constable, Bonnington, and the Pre-Raphaelites,--down to such moderns as Steer, Pryde, John etc." Birnbaum was certainly answering a directive from his client to find works by these artists. Looking to expand the holdings with art of more recent date, Mrs. Danforth also funded the purchase of drawings by such Modernists as Pablo Picasso and Franz Marc. Prints as well as drawings were a clear priority, as numerous 18th-century landscape and architectural print series came to the Museum during her tenure.

Many of the largest gaps were filled from her own personal collection. She and her husband, Dr. Murray S. Danforth, had begun building a truly impressive group of French and American works during the early 1920s. A succession of extraordinary donations came to the Museum from the Danforths beginning with a group of drawings by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec in the mid-1930s. This was followed by a truly magnificent gift in 1942, which included works by Edgar Degas [cover], Paul Cézanne [fig. 8], Georges Seurat [fig. 9], Vincent van Gogh [fig. 10], and John Singer Sargent [fig. 11]. The gift significantly shaped the Museum's strength in French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, for which it is widely known today.

In 1955, Mrs. Danforth endowed the Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund, which was a conflation of several earlier funds that she had created for the Museum. Designated specifically for acquisitions, the fund has since been used for the purchase of over 700 works of art. Mrs. Danforth's vision for the Museum's continued growth, which included acquisitions, an increasingly professionalized staff, and greater visibility within Rhode Island and the nation, has had a lasting effect on the recognition enjoyed by RISD today.





**Fig. 10**  
 Vincent van Gogh  
 Dutch, 1853-1890  
*View of Arles*, 1888  
 Reed pen, ink, wash over graphite  
 on wove paper, 17 x 21 1/2 in.  
 Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth 42.212a

## Conclusion

The breadth of the Museum's group of drawings and prints is unthinkable without the philanthropy of the Metcalf family, especially its female members. Now numbering around 24,000 sheets from all sources, the works on paper are housed in archival storage due to their sensitivity to light and climatic conditions; yet, true to the visions of Mrs. Radeke and Mrs. Danforth, these holdings are frequently studied by students and public alike. Over

1,000 college students each year visit the Department of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs with their professors for focused viewings. Many of the works in this exhibition are brought out regularly for foundation drawing, printmaking, illustration, art history, and other classes. Two new galleries dedicated to works on paper ensure that the public, as well as students, will have access to frequent rotations of works from the permanent collection.

In Mrs. Radeke's day, museums were still in their infancy. Museum objects afforded most visitors and students the first opportunity they may ever have had to see works by major European and American artists. Public galleries thus provided an important venue for the study of art, especially art made at some geographic or temporal remove. Although technology today allows easy viewing of artworks on a global scale, a visit to the RISD Museum





**Fig. 11**

John Singer Sargent  
 American, 1856-1925  
*Rio di Santa Maria Formosa, Venice*, 1905  
 Watercolor, graphite, pen and ink on  
 laid paper, 13 13/16 x 9 3/8 in.  
 Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth 42.223

is sure to confirm what both Mrs. Radeke and Mrs. Danforth understood implicitly. There is no substitute for experiencing a work of art in person. What they both saw as the inherent instructional benefits of viewing works on paper was fueled by the belief, expressed by RISD's founder, Helen Adelia Rowe Metcalf, that art could provide a transformative experience for all. The legacy of Eliza Radeke and Helen Danforth to RISD and to all of Southeastern New England is one of the finest and most diverse collections of drawings and prints in the United States.

Emily J. Peters, Associate Curator of Prints,  
 Drawings, and Photographs, The RISD Museum

## Titles Referenced in the Essay

Martin Birnbaum. *The Last Romantic. The Story of more than a half-century in the world of art.* New York: 1960.

Milton W. Brown. *The Story of the Armory Show.* Greenwich (Connecticut): 1963.

Carla Mathes Woodward. "...A History of the Museum," in *A Handbook of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.* Providence: 1985.

### Cover:

Edgar Degas  
 French, 1834-1917  
*Dancer with a Bouquet*, ca. 1877-1880  
 Pastel, wash technique, gouache,  
 over monotype on laid paper, 15 7/8 x 19 7/8 in.  
 Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth 42.213